

The secrets of the mystery shopper

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Key words

Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

freebie
articulate

perk
nominal

remuneration
assignment

reimburse
scenario

depreciation
tricky

1. To _____ means to give back money that someone has spent, particularly on something related to work.
2. _____ is the process of becoming less valuable than before.
3. A _____ is a situation that could possibly happen.
4. A _____ is an informal word for something that you get that you do not have to pay for.
5. A _____ is an extra payment or benefit that you get in your job.
6. An _____ is a specific task that you must do as part of your job.
7. A _____ amount of money is a very small amount that is much less than something is really worth.
8. _____ is payment or other rewards that you get for your work.
9. If a task is described as _____, it is difficult to do.
10. An _____ person can express their thoughts, arguments and ideas clearly and effectively.

2 Correct the information

Each of these statements contains a mistake. Find the information in the text and correct the errors.

1. More than 50,000 people have registered as mystery shoppers in the UK.
2. Mystery shoppers typically visit five or six stores a day.
3. Mystery shoppers can earn up to £155 a week.
4. Mystery shoppers who video their experience can earn around £100 a day.
5. Twenty per cent of mystery shoppers manage to get regular work each month.
6. Marketforce pays mystery shoppers £25 per visit as a token gesture for their time and effort.

The secrets of the mystery shopper

Level 3 • Advanced

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How would you like to get paid £40,000 a year for shopping? Some mystery shoppers achieve this, but it's not as easy as it sounds

Donna Ferguson

11 March, 2014

- 1 The customer next to you in the queue looks innocent enough. But, instead of a shopping list, you notice she's carrying handwritten notes about the appearance and cleanliness of the store. She's been timing the progression of the queue on her phone ... and is that a tiny camera lens peeking out from her purse? The odds are you've just spotted a mystery shopper.
- 2 There are approximately 50,000 mystery shopping trips carried out every month in the UK, according to the Mystery Shopping Providers Association, and, as more and more spending takes place online, the demand for mystery shoppers is growing. "Retailers are becoming increasingly aware that shoppers who are prepared to set foot in a physical store want a service and an experience they can't get online," says Simon Boydell, spokesman for Marketforce, which has more than 300,000 mystery shoppers on its books. "Our clients want to measure how well their stores are delivering on that experience."
- 3 "We assign different store locations to each shopper and rotate them so that they never go back to the same shop within three months," says Jill Spencer of mystery shopping company ABa. "Each day, they typically spend up to eight hours visiting five to ten stores, plus another hour or two filing detailed reports on every aspect of their visit." For that, the mystery shoppers can earn up to £155 a day. They are also reimbursed for their petrol and hotel stays, and compensated for their car depreciation (the shoppers can be expected to drive as many as 20,000 miles a year). Meanwhile, video mystery shoppers, who film their visits with a hidden camera planted in a buttonhole or handbag, can earn even more – around £300 a day.
- 4 Shoppers are usually repaid any money they spend in the stores and may also be allowed to keep the products they buy. "I'm typically given between £5 and £20 to spend at each store, to assess the service I receive at the till," says Laura, a 50-year-old mystery shopper from Devon, who has been paid to visit around 7,000 shops since 2001. The purchase usually has to be related to a service or a type of product that the retailer wants her to check. "I'm always given a scenario, such as buying something from a specific department or a new product range, but, within that framework, I can often buy whatever I want – and keep it."
- 5 Like most full-time mystery shoppers, Laura is self-employed, taking jobs from ABa and other mystery shopping companies as and when they come up. Her income is typically £30,000 to £40,000 a year and that doesn't include all the freebies she gets on the job. "With the perks, it's enough to live on. But I don't do it because I love shopping. In fact, I hate shopping now. When I'm not working, it pains me to have to go out and buy a pint of milk."
- 6 She does, however, find it satisfying to return to a store she has previously mystery shopped and see standards have improved. "I know it must be because of my feedback or why would they pay me to give it? Some of the retailers I shop at win awards for customer service and I think that is down to us mystery shoppers. I feel I'm not just doing a service to my company; I'm doing a service to all shoppers everywhere."
- 7 Sadly, regular mystery shopping assignments that pay like Laura's are few and far between. In fact, competition is so fierce, she keeps her job a closely guarded secret and even her friends and family don't know who she works for (Laura is not her real name).
- 8 It's estimated that more than 500,000 people have registered as mystery shoppers in the UK, but just 10% or less manage to get regular work each month and this has led to a dramatic reduction in compensation. "Where once you got a fee, reimbursement for your purchase and mileage, you now often just receive a contribution towards a purchase," say Val, a 51-year-old former mystery shopper. "I worked for 40 different mystery shopping companies for almost 20 years but I gave up entirely three years ago because I had bills to pay and very few assignments paid what I considered to be an acceptable rate."

The secrets of the mystery shopper

Level 3 • Advanced

- 9 Nowadays, mystery shopping companies mostly rely on the promise of freebies to incentivize their workers. "Marketforce shoppers typically get a couple of pounds for a visit as a token gesture for their time and effort," says Boydell. "At the most, we'll pay £15 to £25 plus reimbursement for, say, a meal for two or a hotel stay. We don't directly employ any shoppers so we don't have to pay them the minimum wage."
- 10 "I'd go on a cruise for nothing," says Laura. "But I think mystery shopping companies that pay you a nominal fee to travel to a restaurant and eat a meal are exploiting people. I won't touch those jobs anymore." There are plenty of people, however, that would. Hannah, a 41-year-old City lawyer, has conducted nearly 500 visits for the Mystery Dining Company in her spare time without receiving remuneration or travel expenses. As a prestigious "platinum diner", she is regularly hand-picked by the Mystery Dining Company to carry out their most exclusive assignments, enjoying £200 meals at Michelin-starred Mayfair restaurants, five-star hospitality at Ascot and overnight stays at boutique hotels.
- 11 But there's no such thing as a free lunch, even if you work for a mystery dining company. Hannah says she typically spends two to four hours after each visit writing detailed reports on everything from the quality of the food to specific interactions with staff, whom she always needs to be able to name or "subtly" describe. Trickiest of all, she must memorize all these details while eating her meal – unable, of course, to openly write anything down.
- 12 "There's lots to remember and sometimes it can detract from the experience. You're expected to give feedback while it's fresh, so I've had to get up at 5am to write a report before work. It's a challenging thing to do; you need to be focused, articulate and detail orientated."

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3 Comprehension check

Choose the best answer according to the text.

- What is a mystery shopper?
 - someone who visits shops secretly and then tells consumers online about their experiences
 - someone who works for a company that gives feedback to shops on how good or bad their service is
 - someone who works for large stores and evaluates how good their staff are
- Why is mystery shopper Laura given between £5 and £20 to spend at each store she visits?
 - as a token gesture for her time and effort
 - to assess the service she receives at the till
 - to reimburse her for the money she has spent in the stores
- Why has there been a dramatic reduction in compensation for mystery shoppers?
 - because most shopper choose not to work many hours each month
 - because the competition for work is so fierce
 - because companies don't have to pay the minimum wage
- What is one of the main perks that mystery shoppers enjoy?
 - They can sometimes keep the products they buy.
 - They can work from home.
 - They get a large fee plus the reimbursement of their expenses.

The secrets of the mystery shopper

Level 3 • Advanced

4 Find the word

Find the following words and phrases in the text.

1. a two-word phrasal verb meaning *appear slightly from behind or under something* (para 1)
2. a three-word expression meaning *it is likely* (para 1)
3. a four-word expression meaning *not happening very often or not existing in many places* (para 7)
4. a verb meaning *provide someone with the motivation to work hard* (para 9)
5. a two-word noun phrase meaning *an action or decision that is so small that it is nothing more than symbolic* (para 9)
6. a two-word noun phrase meaning *a small and fashionable place to stay* (para 10)
7. an eight-word saying used to mean *people cannot get something good without working hard or giving something in exchange* (para 11)
8. a two-word phrasal verb meaning *make something seem less good, attractive or important* (para 12)

5 Verb + noun collocations

Match the verbs in the left-hand column with the nouns or noun phrases in the right-hand column to make phrases from the text.

- | | |
|--------------|------------------|
| 1. file | a. an award |
| 2. win | b. a visit |
| 3. pay | c. an assignment |
| 4. conduct | d. a report |
| 5. carry out | e. details |
| 6. memorize | f. a fee |

6 Word-building

Complete the sentences using the correct form of the word in brackets at the end of each sentence.

1. Mystery shoppers often assess the _____ of the stores they visit. [CLEAN]
2. Retailers are becoming _____ aware that shoppers want an experience they can't get online. [INCREASE]
3. Mystery shoppers usually expect a _____ of their expenses. [REIMBURSE]
4. Well-paid shopping _____ are few and far between. [ASSIGN]
5. Hannah is a _____ 'platinum diner'. [PRESTIGE]
6. Memorizing details is the _____ part of a mystery diner's work. [TRICKY]

7 Discussion

- Do you think mystery shoppers should be paid more for the work they do and the service they provide for other consumers? Why? Why not?
- What feedback would you give on the last shopping or restaurant experience you had?

The secrets of the mystery shopper

Level 3 • Advanced

KEY

1 Key words

1. reimburse
2. depreciation
3. scenario
4. freebie
5. perk
6. assignment
7. nominal
8. remuneration
9. tricky
10. articulate

2 Correct the information

1. More than **500,000** people have registered as mystery shoppers in the UK.
2. Mystery shoppers typically visit five **to ten** stores a day.
3. Mystery shoppers can earn up to £155 a **day**.
4. Mystery shoppers who video their experience can earn around **£300** a day.
5. **Ten per cent or less** of mystery shoppers manage to get regular work each month.
6. Marketforce pays mystery shoppers **a couple of pounds** per visit as a token gesture for their time and effort.

3 Comprehension check

1. b
2. b
3. b
4. a

4 Find the word

1. peek out
2. the odds are
3. few and far between
4. incentivize
5. token gesture
6. boutique hotel
7. there's no such thing as a free lunch
8. detract from

5 Verb + noun collocations

1. d
2. a
3. f
4. b
5. c
6. e

6 Word-building

1. cleanliness
2. increasingly
3. reimbursement
4. assignments
5. prestigious
6. trickiest